

Resurrecting the Female: A Critical Analysis of Adrienne Rich's Twenty-One Love Poems

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Received: 23 Jul 2024; Received in revised form: 18 Aug 2024; Accepted: 23 Aug 2024; Available online: 28 Aug 2024 ©2024 The Author(s). Published by International Journal of English Language, Education and Literature Studies (IJEEL). This is an open access article under the CC BY license (https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/). Keywords— Identity, lesbian continuum, Identity poetics, Heterosexuality.	<i>The history of women's struggle for self-determination and an authentic identity has been a persistent one. Their autonomous identity has long been threatened by the control exerted by dominant social ideologies. The desire for a free and empowered self-gathered momentum after the birth of Radical Feminism in the first half of the twentieth century. Under the banner of radical philosophy women writer's adopted searching queries and strategic shifts in confronting masculine myths and stereotypes regarding their gender. Poetry became a suitable genre to question the imposed identities. As a result, a reactionary " identity poetics" came into being across Europe. Poets like Audre Lorde, Sylvia Plath, Margaret Atwood and Adrienne Rich undertook a poetics that largely dealt with rediscovering female identity. However, Rich, while moving through different theoretical perspectives, established lesbian identity as the only possible political identity that could release a woman from all patriarchal clutches. Therefore, the paper attempts to analyse Rich's poetic quest and culmination of her search for a radical lesbian identity. The paper foregrounds it's theoretical background in feminist criticism. Besides, Rich, being herself a theorist, provides a foundational basis for her own critical concepts.</i>

The desire for a free and autonomous womanhood underpins women's writing. A historical feminist analysis of the female literary tradition reveals that women writers' distinctive concern with personal experience and problems is a strategic move to attempt self-analysis and generate awareness. It is in this context that Judith Kegan Gardiner writes in "On Female Identity and Writing by Women" (1981):

The concept of female identity provides a key to understanding the special qualities of contemporary writing by women. Because the concept of identity includes [several] variables, it can explain

the diverse ways in which writing by women differs from writing by men more fully than can a theory that poses any single opposition as the explanation (348).

Thus, it becomes evident that the identity theme has been central to women's poetics since antiquity. In their valuable analysis of women's fiction, Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar in "The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-century Literary Imagination" (1979) observe that "the woman's quest for self-definition" (76) is the underlying plot of women's writing in the nineteenth-century.

However, in the 2nd half of 20th century women writers especially theorists like Simone de Beauvoir, Betty Friedan, Kate Millet, Audre Lorde etc investigated the identity problem of a woman and found illuminating connections between gender and female self. Their theoretical perspectives were seconded by the thought provoking queries by Judith Butler. Butler attributed gender to "performative", thereby reflecting a constituted identity rather than expressed by the continuous performance of gender behaviour. Butler's theoretical perspective about gender, helped in reconceptualization of identity furthered a need for a separate feminist aesthetic. Adrienne Rich was among the radical feminists to address the issue of female self Identity.

Rich a lesbian feminist, not only lived through varied experiences like a docile daughter, a Radcliffe graduate, a beleaguered wife and a lesbian, shared a desire to theorize about a complex radical lesbian identity. She embraced lesbian identity as the culmination of women's search for identity.

Since Lesbianism has established itself as a pioneer and powerful strategy adopted by women to confront coercive ways, it offered the perfect example of resistance and revolt. Taking lesbian identity as the perfect and positive image of a woman for being the source of power and pleasure, Elsa Gilman describes the lesbian in her essay "Lesbianism as a Liberating Force" (1977):

The Lesbian personality manifests itself in independence of spirit, in willingness to take responsibility for oneself, to think for oneself, not to take 'authorities' and their dictation on trust. It usually includes erotic attraction to women, although we know there have been many women of Lesbian personality who never had sexual relations with one another. What is strongly a part of the Lesbian personality is loyalty and love of other women. (385)

As such, Rich embraced it as the culmination of women's search for identity. In the essay "It is The Lesbian in Us", Rich calls the "primary intensity" between women as the lesbian identity. She further describes lesbians as "the self-chosen woman; the woman who refuses to obey, who has said "no" to fathers". Lesbian is a woman "who gravitates

towards strong women" who is driven to "feel imaginatively, render in language, grasp the full connection between woman & woman" (*On Lies* 201).

In her provocative essay "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence", Rich elaborates her idea of Lesbianism. She writes:

to embrace many more forms of primary intensity between and among women, including the sharing of a rich inner life, the bonding against male tyranny, the giving and receiving of practical and political support ... [thus] we begin to grasp breadths of female history and psychology which have lain out of reach as a consequence of limited, mostly clinical, definitions of Lesbianism. (*Blood* 51-52)

Rich's idea of lesbian identity is echoed in many contemporary feminist

writings. Catherine Stimpson, in "Zero Degree Deviancy: The Lesbian Novel in English", attributes similar meaning and significance to lesbian identity:

My definition of the lesbian--as writer, as character, and as reader--will be conservative and severely literal. She is a woman who finds other women erotically attractive and gratifying. Of course, a lesbian is more than her body more than her flesh, but Lesbianism partakes of the body partakes of the flesh. That carnality distinguishes it from gestures of political sympathy with homosexuals and from affectionate friendships in which women enjoy each other, support each other, and commingle a sense of Identity and well-being. (*Feminism*, 301)

The above definitions suggest that Rich embraces lesbian identity for a variety of compelling reasons. Women have been rendered to the status of 'other' with respect to men on the pretext of the physicality of their bodies and the sexual orientations thereof. As a result, a woman's body under the patriarchal norm becomes essentially available at the service of men for their sexual gratification and emotional development. In addition, the dichotomy between male and female that divides the race into heterosexual and lesbian women has been the major obstacle in changing the status quo and

accomplishing a female identity. For Rich, it is the lesbian identity with its political dimensions that caters to both these challenges. Claire Keyes observes that Rich has been a strategist in choosing Lesbianism as the appropriate model to shape her poetic proposal. She writes:

Feminism, as a vision of an ideal society, becomes Rich's faith. In the same manner, she embraces Lesbianism. Her most intimate personal relationship becomes a reflection of her political and social idealism. Thus, the life and the work of Adrienne Rich are integrated whole. At the pot of this integration is an ideology that champions the common woman. (Keyes 161)

A crucial analysis of women's history reveals that lesbians have approved of themselves as women who prefer women instead of men in their socio-psychological and sexual endeavors. Consequently, a lesbian defies all established norms of gender and sexuality. By acting out as a lesbian, a woman is able to center her relationships with the female, thereby making a man her last choice. In this connection, Rich writes, "The point is not 'exclusion' of man; it is the primary presence of women to ourselves and each other which is the crucible of a new language." (*On Lies*, 249). Owing to this kind of female bonding, a woman can define herself not with respect to the man but with respect to her relationship with a woman. In resorting to a lesbian model of life, women can exercise their control over their subjective selves, besides emancipating themselves from the physical and sexual violation of masculine tyranny.

Appreciating Rich's deliberate choice of lesbian identity as the most appropriate political identity for women, Catherine Stimpson writes in

Andrienne Rich and Lesbian, Feminist Poetry:

If women are to change themselves and their social relations, if they are to liberate themselves and each other, they must revivify that Lesbianism hidden or denied, feared or despised. Lesbianism is an imperative not because Rich imposes it, but because it is a well spring of identity that must be sprung if women are to claim any authentic identity at (11).

A lesbian identity, despite its social connotations, offers Rich and her gender a better option than the heterosexual way of bonding. Describing heterosexuality as "that, old last act" within a world of "Ten o'clock, a drizzling hour of traffic and wet newspaper", Rich robs it off all its cultural sanctity and romantic fervor. For Rich, the leading cause for heterosexuality to get enforced upon women's lives is by way of "the rendering invisible of the lesbian possibility, an engulfed continent which rises fragmentally into view from time to time only to become submerged again" (*Blood* 50). This invisibility has muffled the central portion of truth about the secrets of women's lives, which needs to be heard. In this connection, Rich writes:

Whatever is unnamed, undepicted in images, whatever is omitted from biography, censored in collections of letters, whatever is misnamed as something else, made difficult – to come by, whatever is buried in the memory by the collapse of meaning under an inadequate or lying language— this will become, not merely unspoken, but unspeakable (*Blood* 199).

In this context, Rich thinks it imperative to celebrate Lesbianism not only in her personal life but also in her artistic creed. Since lesbian love between women becomes a source of emancipation, inspiration, and emotional attachment between the participant lovers, Rich invests her successive volumes of poetry and prose with lesbian experiences, hitherto tabooed.

Rich's poetic volume, *The Dream of a Common Language*, celebrates the overt lesbian love and the freedom won at the cost of social taboos and cultural infidelity. The volume and the oddly set "Twenty-One Poems" mark a transition in her poetry, both in content and structure. In these poems, Rich attempts a new kind of poetry in the narrative form, thematizing the traditional love story, not between the man and woman but between woman and woman. Rich steps into the Renaissance sonnet tradition, although implicitly imitating Shakespeare's homosexual poems. It is in this connection that Hayden Carruth describes "Twenty- One Love Poems" love sonnets (272). Rich pioneers in transforming the traditional love narrative, a usually gendered genre, to harbor the unusual lesbian subject. As a female practitioner, she

displays an extraordinary knack for rendering the lesbian theme in a language that connects her with her intended readers, the community of women. In this way, Rich succeeds in investing her art with, what Joanne Feit Diehl calls, in the essay, "Cartographies of Silence: Rich's Common Language & the Woman Poet", "the woman poet's need to find or reinvent a language in

which she can seize the power" (qtd in Feminist Studies, 546). Although biased in her critical approach to the lesbian content of the volume, Keyes brings out the lesbian significance of this collection. She remarks:

In the middle of the collection, Rich places a group of "Twenty-One Love Poems" written about her relationship with another woman. These love poems, plus the overt feminism of the book as a whole, heighten the "exclusion" of men, even if that is not the point, and raise the question of the "commonality" of a language restricted to one sex. (Keyes 160)

However, a close textual analysis of "Twenty-One Poems" reveals the significant potential and power that lesbian feelings invest in her poetry. In this connection, Rima Shore records in the essay "To Move Openly/ in the Pull of Gravity":

This would be a different book were its poems unnumbered, were it called simply Love Poems; for this poetry spills over its form, breaking the limit set by its title. There are twenty-two poems (the lines which seem most like a conventional love poem are called "THE FLOATING POEM, UNNUMBERED"). In this way, the title reflects what, in an important sense, this love poetry is about--and perhaps suggests something of what love is about and what poetry is about: recognizing limits (conventions, laws, boundaries) and breaking through them (Shore 263).

Since Lesbianism, for Rich, serves as a substitute for heterosexual bonding, she explicitly establishes lesbian relationships as a better choice not only for women but also for human existence. The poems are replete with conjugal joy and tenderness and bliss that support a harmonious

existence. For instance, in poem No. 2 of "Twenty-One Love Poems", Rich feels the bliss of an erotic relationship:

I wake up in your bed, I know I have been
dreaming Much earlier, the alarm broke us
from each other, You have been at your
desk for hours

Similarly, in poem No. 6, the Lesbian consummation between the bodies, which is mutual and harmonious, is hinted at:

Your small hands, precisely equal to my
own - only the thumb is larger, longer in
these hands

I could trust the world, or in many hands
like these,

such hands might carry out unavoidable
violence with such restraint, with such a
grasp

of the range and limits of violence

that provides ever after would be obsolete
(*Collected Poems* 522).

Lesbian love is described not only as an intimate, rapturous and passionate act between women but very strategically, Rich dramatizes it uniquely to invest it with erotic overtones to debunk the heterosexual imperative. Rich writes in "Floating Poem Unnumbered":

Whatever happens with us, your body Will
haunt mine - tender, delicate your
lovemaking ...

In my rose-wet cave- whatever happens,
this is (*Collected Poems* 527)

In this connection, Adrian Oktenberg argues in "Disloyal to Civilization":

The meeting of lovers in the "Twenty-one Love Poems" is unique because it is on terms which are consciously antipatriarchal; lovers who are disloyal to patriarchal civilization strive to free themselves from its attitudes even in their intimate relations, even in themselves. This is what makes the twenty- one love poems new. (79)

However, Rich does not restrict her lesbian love to

merely the corporeal act and consummation of lust, but a colossal source of desire, force and power that she describes as "The drive to connect". It is this "drive to connect", which Rich feels is the peremptory call of lesbian identification for women. In her diary, Shatayev, the speaking persona of the poem "Phantasia for Elvira Shatayev", describes this power that gets released during a woman's identification process:

In the diary, I wrote: Now we are ready
and each of us knows it: I have never loved

As a result, lesbian love forges connections and effective bonds between women and culminates in women's identification. It is in this context Rich takes lesbian identity as the only appropriate strategy available to women that allows for distinction as a gender. In her controversial essay "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence", Rich describes her lifelong conviction of making some in-between place that could bridge "the gap between lesbian and feminist. I wanted, at the very least, for feminists to find it less possible to read, write, or teach from a perspective of unexamined heterocentricity" (*Blood* 4). To connect women along historical times and across cultures and overlap the boundaries between heterosexual women and lesbians, a lesbian identity offers the most strategic force. To achieve her aim of establishing connections, Rich invents the controversial terms "lesbian existence" and "lesbian continuum".

As a conscious writer and feminist theoretician, Rich visualizes lesbian identity as an inclusive identity for women with multiple political implications that could fill the chasm dividing women not only of the past and present but also mitigate cultural differences besides linking the lesbians with straight women. In "Compulsory Hetero-Sexuality and Lesbian Existence", Rich attaches paramount significance to these provocative terms. Lesbian existence suggests "both the fact of the historical presence of lesbians and our continuing creation of the meaning of that existence". Rich tries to recreate the heterosexual-lesbian dichotomy in order to establish a perpetual phenomenon between women. Describing this process as the 'lesbian continuum' which includes:

a range- through each women's life and
throughout history - of woman- identified

experience, not simply the fact that a woman has had or consciously desired genital sexual experience with another woman. If we expand it to embrace many more forms of primary intensity between and among women, including the sharing of a rich inner life, and the bonding against male tyranny, the giving and receiving of practical and political support . . . we begin to grasp breadths of female history and psychology which have lain out of reach as a consequence of limited, mostly clinical, definitions of Lesbianism (*Blood* 51-2).

Rich's pronouncement of the lesbian identity, along with the cryptic terms "lesbian existence" and "lesbian continuum", sparked a robust critical debate between heterosexual critics and lesbian feminists. Heterosexual writers Claire Keyes, Karen Alkalay-Gut, Adrian Oktenberg, Kevin Megurik, Olga Broumas, etc., in their critical appraisal of Rich's lesbian identity, believe that it is her personal experience that

led her to the extreme act of "male exclusionism".
Keyes describes Rich's vision of Lesbianism as
"exclusionary, besides limited to one sex"

(160). Alkalay-Gut in *The Lesbian Imperative* rejected it for its "decision to reject men" (260).

Similarly, Rich's distinctive use of Lesbianism and 'continuum' does not fit with the boundaries of contemporary lesbian relationships. The lesbian feminists Janice Raymond and Martha Thompson found Rich impartial in her attempt to bind heterosexual women and lesbians in her continuum. In *A Passion for Friends: Toward a Philosophy of Female Affections*, Raymond and Martha describe Rich's attempt to link straight and lesbian women as "false inclusion", which is "logically incorrect, morally short-changing to women who are not lesbians (16).

However, a critical analysis of Rich's lesbian poetry, especially the volume *A Wild Patience Has Taken Me This Far* (1981) and her theoretical insights reveal invincible reasons at the core of her lesbian ideology. Rich, in her search for an authentic self, found an inescapable connection between heterosexuality and a woman's self-autonomy. The enforced heterosexuality, by way of being the only available natural, emotional, and sexual inclination for women,

leaves an oblique chance for the development of a woman's independent self. For Rich, it had become imperative for women to ensure "questioning of assumptions once taken for granted" (*Blood* 68). Lesbianism occurs not only as a means of resisting heterosexuality but as a way to end the dichotomy that was plaguing the feminist movement. Her provocative idea of lesbian existence is not only inclusive but also encompasses the whole female history from antiquity to the present. Her claim about the continuum rejects the claim of contemporary lesbians, as it comprehends much more than genital sexuality. In *Blood Bread and Poetry*, Rich responds to this charge:

What I had thought to delineate rather complexly as a continuum has begun to sound more like "life-style Shopping." Lesbian continuum – the phrase – came from a desire to allow for the greatest possible variation of female- identified experience, while paying a different kind of respect to lesbian existence – the traces and knowledge of women who have made their primary erotic and emotional choices for women (73-74).

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